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Citation for final published version:

Bennett, Lucy ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-2264-7596> and Kidd, Jenny ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0188-2140> 2017. Myths about media studies: the construction of media studies education in the British press. Continuum 31 (2) , pp. 163-176. 10.1080/10304312.2016.1265096 file

Publishers page: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/10304312.2016.1265096>  
<<http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/10304312.2016.1265096>>

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To cite this article: Lucy Bennett & Jenny Kidd (2017) Myths about media studies: the construction of media studies education in the British press, Continuum, 31:2, 163-176, DOI: [10.1080/10304312.2016.1265096](https://doi.org/10.1080/10304312.2016.1265096)

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/10304312.2016.1265096>



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Published online: 08 Dec 2016.



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## Myths about media studies: the construction of media studies education in the British press

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### ABSTRACT

This article examines the construction and representation of Media Studies education in the British press. Drawing on an empirical analysis of five years of newspaper coverage, it concludes that Media Studies has been predominantly represented and framed as a 'soft' or 'Mickey Mouse' subject, with over half (61.1%) the news stories analysed approaching it through this lens. It shows that the right of centre British press in particular promoted this understanding of Media Studies as a subject devoid of educational value and with low potential for employability, rather than a legitimate option for study. When themes could be approached from either a negative or positive viewpoint (such as employability prospects and subject value), more often than not the negative perspective dominated. This article argues that this perspective has been bolstered by these newspapers largely through their justification of government action and policy towards the subject, which is framed as a positive interjection and opportunity for protecting educational standards. Ultimately, we show that the British debate surrounding Media Studies has been informed by a top-down discourse of elite political and Conservative party sources, with a scarcity of oppositional or broader political representation – a landscape that frames Media Studies education as a delegitimized and worthless pursuit of study.

In 2015 we were approached by the Media, Communications and Cultural Studies Association (MeCCSA) in the UK to carry out a small research project on their behalf for the Higher Education Academy (HEA), a national teaching body. The project, 'Teaching and Learning In the Disciplines', was a transdisciplinary investigation into current and anticipated challenges facing Higher Education (HE) that would help determine the future shape and focus of the HEA, and provide a steer for its relationship with learned bodies and subject associations going forward. MeCCSA was one of 27 such organizations in the HEA study from the Association of Law Teachers to the Royal Geographical Society, the Historical Association and the Royal Society of Chemistry.<sup>1</sup> This article interrogates one of the findings of our study, backed by a more extensive evidence base and more focused research question. This article is concerned specifically with a British context, but as Media Studies is taught around the world, the data and findings have international resonance.

The HEA were highly prescriptive in their methodology not least because they were hoping to draw conclusions about challenges faced across the HE sector from a common empirical base. We were to carry out three focus groups of between six and eight HE teaching staff from across the pay scale, and across the range of institutions represented by the HEA. The disciplinary base of MeCCSA is of course

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incredibly broad, and we were aware that all we would present in our report was an overview of (some) emergent concerns about teaching and learning, and an insight into the frames within which those working in the field were currently debating them.

There were some unsurprising conclusions to our research (Bennett and Kidd 2015). Our small study of teaching staff revealed they were concerned about the pace of change in the media landscape, the balance between practice and theory within courses, and the impact of copyright laws on the resources available for study. These were felt to be particularly acute challenges within the fields of media, culture and communications. But what *was* surprising to us was the extent to which our participants seemed universally to have bought into the idea that these disciplines of ours were battling against a dominant discursive framework within the press that was poisonous in its rhetoric and based on a dominant conservative ideology that unabashedly valued certain kinds of knowledge over others. This problematic emerged (and re-emerged) as the biggest stated challenge facing our respondents in every focus group, allied with concerns about the wider political context and the pressures it placed upon those working in HE more broadly (and of course students). It was a concern which respondents thought was particular to the subject of Media Studies, and if not new, then certainly getting worse in what was considered a hostile climate.

But is there a consistent and persistent undermining of Media Studies as our participants felt? And if there is, did it worsen during the Conservative/Liberal Democrat coalition Government of 2010–2015 and the policies of Michael Gove as Education Secretary in particular (as our respondents asserted, even in Wales)?<sup>2</sup> Or could the narrative about Media Studies as a soft ‘Mickey Mouse’ subject – a narrative that our respondents so readily performed – have become a myth perpetuated by media scholars themselves? Might there be an alternative or counter-narrative to be found in press coverage if one looked hard enough? This article explores these questions. It begins with an overview of existing research on the representation of Media Studies in the British press noting that there is remarkably little scholarship in this area to evidence these now historic and prevailing concerns about coverage. It then presents and discusses findings from an extensive content analysis of the press from 2010 to 2015 to explore whether the above perceptions are warranted or whether they are indeed evidence of a mythologizing of the dominant narrative.

It is worth noting at the outset here the wider context within which our discussions took place. In the UK in 2015 there were protracted debates between Government and the examination boards about the continuation of a number of subjects at GCSE and GCE level that included media and film.<sup>3</sup> For a large part of 2015 their future looked very uncertain indeed. Although there are regional variations, the rise in student fees, removal of teaching grants and lifts on student caps were also part of this backdrop (Warren and Fenton 2014). Media educator Jenny Grahame proposed in 2013 that we were in ‘the most catastrophic period of educational administration we have seen in our lifetimes’ (Grahame 2013, 7).

That said, the study of media, communications and cultural studies more broadly appears to be thriving in both pre- and post-1992 institutions. According to a recent MeCCSA report, the number of undergraduate students taking these subjects rose by 400% between 1996/1997 and 2012/2013 to 35,490 (Warren and Fenton 2014). The recent UK Research Excellence Framework recognized excellent media research in many institutions, and noted that research as having far-reaching and impressive impacts.<sup>4</sup>

Our argument here is that, against that backdrop, the UK press – aided by their over-reliance on Conservative voices – have been integral to the near un-doing of Media Studies at worst,<sup>5</sup> and its degradation as a discipline at best. The meanings and values of Media Studies have been consistently scrutinized through a predominantly negative lens. These are things those of us teaching the subject at whatever level understand instinctively, and have debated hotly, but this study offers a comprehensive – if unnerving – evidential basis for those concerns. These findings are significant as the press are for some people an important source of information on education, and thus what subjects they give value to can have strong implications, most significantly perhaps for parents and prospective students or pupils.

We will begin this article with an outline of the limited existing scholarship focused on the representation of Media Studies education in the media. The next section then explains the method and data-set examined within our own content analysis of newspaper coverage. Following this, we present the frames identified within the analysis, considering their appearance overall and across different newspapers, before moving to an outline of sources used in stories and party affiliation of political sources. Finally, we end with discussion of the implications of these findings and suggestions for future research.

In sum, this article presents a focused insight into the five-year landscape of newspaper coverage of Media Studies education against the backdrop of the most significant reappraisal of the subject in decades. It demonstrates clearly the problematic (if not unsurprising) ways that the subject has been framed and its value mapped.

## Media studies in academic debate

As Thornham and O'Sullivan have observed, 'media studies in the UK has endured a decidedly chequered history'. Despite the growth of the subject across all levels of education since the 1980s, they say it is notable that 'the well established, internationally respected range of media studies courses have to be routinely called to account and ritually 'put in their place'' (2004, 717). (See also Murdock and Golding 2015 for a detailed account of Media Studies' development in the UK). Academic work focusing on the value and meaning of Media Studies has often lamented this limited depiction of the subject being 'put in its place' as a 'Mickey Mouse' or 'soft' subject, positioning and defending it as a legitimate subject of study (Cole 2003; Moore 2014; Sjøvaag and Moe 2009; Whannel 2013). In 2011 the 'Manifesto for Media Education' website was launched with contributions from media scholars and educators all over the world that spoke to the ways this subject was being degraded. David Buckingham surmised that 'as media educators, we have spent so long campaigning for our field that most of us could probably rehearse the basic rationale in our sleep' (2011). Natalie Fenton reflected that questions about the 'point' of media education left her 'deeply annoyed and desperately perplexed' (2011).

James Curran's keynote at the 2013 MeCCSA conference entitled 'Mickey Mouse Squeaks Back' worked to further charge this defence, declaring that 'media studies have been subject to periodic attack by quality newspapers, across the political spectrum, for over fifteen years' (2013, 1), an attack that is formulated with 'prejudice and ignorance' (2013, 9). Pondering a year later on the issues raised by this keynote and call to action, David Buckingham lamented, 'why do we seem to have made so little headway in establishing the public legitimacy of what we do?' (2014, 7–8). In 2004 Sue Thornham and Tim O'Sullivan undertook a study examining the perceptions held by those invested in debates about Media Studies, such as teachers, employers, graduates and students. They examined specifically the growing discourses and concerns surrounding the subject and employability, noting the importance of 'the discourses which frame' participants' perceptions in their analysis. In the focus groups they carried out, it became clear that the value of pupils' studies in terms of 'skills and competencies' (2004, 733) needed to be pointed out to them against a backdrop of negative assumptions.

Research that unpacks and unravels empirical data explicitly demonstrating these depictions has been limited however. There have been only two studies conducted into the representation – and construction – of Media Studies in the press. In 2001 Martin Barker undertook a textual and content analysis, through the lens of the question 'what is it with this hostility to our tradition?' (2001, 202). He examined 50 press reports published in British newspapers between 1993 and 1999, analysing the debates and criticisms of Media Studies therein, concluding that the subject had been positioned as a symptom of wider concerns about 'declines in quality'. The study proposed five perspectives from which the subject had been critiqued in the press: culture, intellectual, conservative, anti-intellectual and employment, with the first four of these alluding to a sense that the subject was responsible for nothing less than the death of academic and educational standards. This dismissal of Media Studies, then, was found to be not accidental or neutral, but ideological: 'there is an excess in these attacks which reveals a depth to the antagonism far outrunning any worries about the usefulness or not of



media studies' (2001, 209). As such, simple counter-presentation of evidence towards this attack was not going to have much of an impact.

In 2011, Dan Laughey undertook a search to examine the frequency of the term 'Media Studies' as correlated with the term 'soft subject' in the British press. His results demonstrated that, in comparison to other subjects, Media Studies yielded the highest number of appearances anchored to the pejorative term, a finding that led him to conclude that 'media studies, as if anyone needed proof, is the archetypal Mickey Mouse degree' (2001, 58). Laughey cites a number of criticisms of the subject; it is seen as both too theoretical and too vocational, lacking a canon, as anti-intellectual and politically left-leaning (Laughey 2010). He notes in his study that the right-leaning press are the principal architects of the campaign against Media Studies, an assertion also made by Fraser and Wardle:

There are those who would dismiss the very idea of studying the media. The *Daily Mail* might argue that it has only been available in schools and at degree level to ensure that the participation numbers for young people engaged in formal learning and gaining good qualifications remain high – the 'dumbing down' agenda. (Fraser and Wardle 2013, 4)

They suggest that part of the problem is that studying the media looks like fun, disrupting the 'common view of education ... that it does not do us any good unless it hurts'. (2013, 4)

In this research, we build on this work by constructing a much broader sample to analyse the current state of Media Studies' representation in the British press (from 2010 to 2015), giving a more comprehensive appraisal of the ways these discourses have been activated in press coverage, by whom and under what conditions.

## Method

In order to examine how Media Studies has been constructed in the British press, we conducted a content analysis coding for sources, the affiliation of political sources, themes in the coverage, words used to describe 'Media Studies', and criticisms and praise for the subject (all variables were tested for inter-coder reliability and each achieved over 80%). In order to collate the sample we performed a search on Nexis for mentions of 'Media Studies' AND 'education' that occurred within all UK newspapers between 1 September 2010 and 1 September 2015. The rationale for selecting this time-frame was to chart any changes over the five-year period which encompassed a transition between Governments (Conservative and Lib Dem coalition elected in May 2010, followed by a Conservative ruling government elected in May 2015). After removing all Ireland only articles (thus not part of the UK) and any online only pieces (in order to have a consistent sample – Nexis did not include online pieces from all the British newspapers), the search produced 248 relevant articles from the main national British newspapers: *The Guardian/Observer* (broadsheet, left of centre), *Daily Express* (tabloid, right of centre), *Daily Mail* (middle market tabloid, right of centre), *Daily Mirror* (tabloid, left of centre), *The Times* (former broadsheet, right of centre), *The Daily Telegraph* (broadsheet, right of centre), *Independent* (former broadsheet, left leaning), *The I* (compact, liberal centre), *Daily Star* (tabloid, right of centre), *The Sun* (tabloid, right of centre) and *The Sunday People* (tabloid, left of centre). Assigning political affiliations to publications is clearly fraught with complexity and involves processes of interpretation, but here we draw from Wahl-Jorgensen and Jones (forthcoming). All Sunday editions of these newspapers were included, in addition to all types of news coverage (such as opinion pieces, letters, editorials, news, features). The sample thus encompasses the spectrum of printed national press in the UK. Broadcast media were outside the scope of this study. Although print newspapers are just one component of the multiplatform contemporary consumption of news, they still remain relevant and can contribute to, and inform, online and broadcast discussions. Such cross-fertilization of the public discourse would be an interesting avenue for further research.

The sample comprised searches for the term 'Media Studies', not accounting for Film Studies or Journalism courses, which could also be classed as allied to Media Studies. It looked at all instances where that term was used in conjunction with the word 'education'. Again this is potentially – but usefully – restrictive (not 'schools' or 'learning'), giving us a manageable sample for a comprehensive

content analysis and allowing us to focus more concretely on specific discussions surrounding the subject and education.

### The conceptualization of media studies in the British press

In order to map the conceptual landscape of the subject across the five years under analysis we coded for any frames apparent within each news story. Frames are 'some aspects of a perceived reality' that are selected and promote a 'particular problem, definition, casual interpretation, moral evaluation and/or treatment recommendation' (Entman 1993, 53). Thus, within the news they are 'schemata of interpretation' (Goffman 1974, 55; Dekavalla 2016, 5) which have an impact on how an issue, event or story is then defined, and the lenses through which it is viewed. The list of frames appearing within the news coverage was compiled and developed while undertaking pilot coding and added to when new frames appeared during the actual coding process. All stories were placed into at least one frame, with each frame appearing no more than once per story, but multiple categories could be selected for each story depending on its content (which is reflected in the 286.6% total percentage overall).

It is not possible in this one article to explore in great detail the entire range of frames, or to reflect the nuance of much of the reporting (which often moves between frames, and between positive and negative perspectives). A high-level analysis reveals that the dominant frames are: Media Studies as a supposedly 'soft' subject; Media Studies as a particular concern at HE level and at A Level (GCE); and Government action which, during the sampling period, usually correlated negatively with the way Media Studies was being debated. There is attention paid to the numbers of students taking the subject, their recruitment and earning potential once they graduate and the level of student fees (and associated debates about value for money).

The following sections will unpack the figures from Table 1 paying particular attention to the predominant framing of Media Studies and three pertinent areas: firstly in terms of its *value* as a 'soft'/'Mickey Mouse' subject, secondly as a particular concern within the *status* and context of HE, and thirdly as related to *prospects* in terms of limited possibilities for employment. This analysis is followed by an insight into which frames dominated across specific papers.

Table 1. Frames across news coverage.

| Frame  | Count | Percent of total stories (%) |
|--|-------|------------------------------|
| Soft subject/Mickey Mouse                      | 151   | 61.1                         |
| HE discussion                                  | 105   | 42.5                         |
| Government action/policy                       | 84    | 34.0                         |
| A level discussion                             | 79    | 32.0                         |
| GCSE discussion                                | 55    | 22.3                         |
| Employability (lack of/negatively)             | 41    | 16.6                         |
| Worthwhile/challenging subject                 | 40    | 16.2                         |
| Lower number of students taking media studies  | 24    | 9.7                          |
| Higher number of students taking media studies | 20    | 8.1                          |
| Tuition fees/student loans                     | 17    | 6.9                          |
| Media studies courses(s) being reformed/ending | 16    | 6.5                          |
| Desire to study                                | 12    | 4.9                          |
| Employability (positively)                     | 11    | 4.5                          |
| Media studies course(s) being launched         | 9     | 3.6                          |
| Pay  | 9     | 3.6                          |
| Achievement/success                            | 7     | 2.8                          |
| Industry links                                 | 6     | 2.4                          |
| Teaching hours decrease                        | 5     | 2.0                          |
| Teaching facilities                            | 5     | 2.0                          |
| Teaching standards                             | 4     | 1.6                          |
| Theory/vocational balance                      | 3     | 1.2                          |
| UCAS points system                             | 3     | 1.2                          |
| Subject funding                                | 2     | .8                           |
| Total  | 708   | 286.6                        |

### *Educational value: media studies as a 'soft'/'Mickey Mouse' subject*

As is clearly evident from Table 1, the frame that permeated and dominated most coverage was a negative perspective towards Media Studies, with it being positioned as a 'soft' or 'Mickey Mouse' subject devoid of worth and value. This is akin to James Curran's observation that 'at the heart of most attacks on Media Studies is the assumption that a field which examines ephemeral content must be inherently lightweight' (2013, 4), an assumption that rests within the use of the label 'Mickey Mouse'. In total, more than half, 151 (61.1%), of all stories that we analysed across our five-year sample featured an expressed viewpoint that engaged in a delegitimization of the subject along these lines. This was communicated through tropes such as inherent assumptions of agreement by all: 'that a student reading media studies is of no earthly use to the society he wants to fund him [*sic*], I need hardly argue to the readers of this column' (Jacobson, *The Independent*, 11 December 2010); warnings that the subject demonstrates a crisis in educational standards: 'The consequences will be found out in five, ten years' time when we're not producing the engineers and the scientists but we are producing the media studies students' (quotation from Chris McGovern, featured in *Daily Mail* and *The Daily Telegraph* 27 January 2012); and suggestions that public money was being wasted funding students to study the subject: 'it is hard-working taxpayers who must foot the bill for students to spend four years on meaningless media studies courses' (Littlejohn, *Daily Mail*, 12 November 2010). A discussion of government action and policy very often gave further impetus to the expression of these views. A news story entitled 'The A-Levels in Idiocy' (Petre and Knowsley, *Mail on Sunday*, 11 May 2014) focused on education secretary Michael Gove's warning that 'dumbed-down exams featuring pop stars and comedians could fatally undermine his attempts to drive up standards'. Five questions from Media Studies exams were included in a bid to demonstrate this dumbing down of education. Thus, overall the coverage corresponded to Martin Barker's patterning of the attacks on Media Studies in that they 'share a common premise, that Media Studies amounts to and embodies a "death of standards"' (2001, 214).

Alongside the frames used we also explored the range of descriptive terms used to talk about Media Studies. Allied to the framing of Media Studies as 'soft' (69 times), 'Mickey Mouse' (17 times) and 'easy' (12 times) were a host of other terms including 'useless', 'pointless', 'worthless', 'low quality', 'silly', 'non-subject', and even (although only once each in the sample) 'fluffy', 'dubious', 'flaky', 'self-indulgent', 'irrelevant', 'lesser', 'sub-standard', 'for dummies' and 'dishonourable'.

Conversely, the notion of Media Studies being a subject full of intellectual rigour and a worthwhile pursuit only appeared across 40 stories (16.2%) in our sample. Articles that positioned Media Studies as a valuable subject included personal accounts of experience: Kevin Maher's opinion column (*The Times*, 17 August 2015) took 'enormous exception to the short sighted assumptions behind the argument' that Media Studies was a 'flaky' subject. As Maher describes, his own experience was 'more informative, inspiring and galvanising than anything I had done or ... have since'. Others pointed out the contemporary relevance of the subject, with Ellen Jones rebutting Sir Jonathan Miller's comments that a Media Studies degree is like 'having a degree in stationery' by asserting that 'only some of today's school-leavers are suited to a career in science or technology, but all will have to negotiate the world through the prism of the media' (*The Independent*, 17 August 2014). Yasmin Alibhai-Brown, a part-time professor in Media Studies, also stressed that 'media literacy is a key component... so, yes, bright young things –go and do Media Studies in order to be a better democrat' (*The Independent*, 19 August 2013).

The most frequently used positive descriptive term for Media Studies was 'useful' (occurring four times), followed by 'popular' (twice), 'flourishing' (twice) and (once each) 'informative', 'inspiring', 'mind-expanding' and 'wide-ranging'. There is then a more limited lexicon of positive descriptors, especially when it comes to debating the intellectual worth of the subject.

In the Ellen Jones and Kevin Maher pieces above, there is evidence of a dialectic between negative and positive viewpoints which we found intriguing, and sought to further interrogate. To do this, we explored how often Media Studies was represented as both a soft subject *and* a worthwhile subject within any one news story. Overall, there were 22 stories that comprised both viewpoints (8.9% of the sample). What seems evident is that even those stories seeking to present a more positive representation



of Media Studies are simultaneously repeating and re-circulating the limited and dominant views outlined above (in more than half of the 'positive' stories). This is demonstrated in a story in the *Independent* (Johnston, 28 October 2013), that seeks to emphasize that 'social science students are actually more likely to be in a job after leaving university than science or arts graduates' yet opens with the joke: 'science graduates spend their careers asking 'Why does it work?' engineering graduates ponder 'How does it work?' while their friends from Media Studies ask: 'Do you want fries with that?'" Although the article goes on to underline how this 'old gag' is being rendered obsolete, it seems the negative discourse has to be acknowledged.

Overall, these results point to a pattern that when themes could be approached from either a negative or positive viewpoint (such as employability prospects and subject worth), more often than not the negative perspective dominated. The overall dialectic within these stories only serves to highlight the singularity of mainstream representation of the discipline. Even where there was an undercurrent that tried to debunk and rebut the positioning of Media Studies as a 'Mickey Mouse' subject, the restricted discursive repertoire at journalists' disposal made a counter-narrative nigh on impossible. Indeed, it is their *choices* that become significant.

### ***Education status: a focus on HE***

The second most predominant way in which Media Studies was framed was through the lens of HE. Overall, there was more discussion of Media Studies at a university (rather than school or college) level, with it accounting for 42.5% of all coverage. This may be explained by two main areas of discussion that also took a negative stance towards the subject: (1) apparent concern surrounding employability of current and forthcoming Media Studies university graduates (see next section), and (2) discussion surrounding the Russell Group's (a body representing 24 leading universities across the UK) publication of an official guidebook *Informed Choices* in February 2011 that contributed to a negative perception of 'soft' subjects such as Media Studies on applications for undergraduate study in favour of traditional or 'facilitating' ones (such as Maths and English). It questioned: 'are you trying to avoid a challenge?' to those considering studying the 'soft' subjects, warning them that 'If you plan to take more than one perceived "soft" subject, some caution may be needed' (2011). The fourth edition of the guide, published for 2015–2016, demonstrated a different approach, stating that 'It's not about "hard" or "soft" subjects, but the right ones'. The implication here is that potential students are already able to distinguish those subjects that will keep their options open from the 'wrong' ones that might instead limit their life choices.

In the wake of the initial publication, a letter in *The Guardian* by two media academics entitled 'media studies and drama are not "soft"' questioned the assertions of the Russell Group guide, calling for 'an independent guide to the admissions policies of all universities, alongside a genuinely transparent set of information on the subjects they are categorising and the learning outcomes they are designed to produce' (McDougall and Bazagette, 8 February 2011). The guidance represented in *Informed Choices* was of course intended to be just that; guidance. Yet it was reported in some of the papers as an unqualified truth about university admission prospects and processes. It was reported that certain universities were in the habit of completely disqualifying applicants with Media Studies GCE, putting it in the same category as General Studies or Citizenship Studies as a 'non-preferred' subject. This is not a baseless claim as can be seen if one looks at information about undergraduate entry requirements for some universities.<sup>6</sup> It of course raises questions about the grounds upon which decisions are made about what constitute legitimate fields of study at undergraduate level, decisions which have, in turn, likely informed the Westminster Government's reappraisal of the status of both GCE and GCSE Media Studies in 16 2015.<sup>7</sup>

### ***Educational prospects: lack of employability***

Media Studies is often positioned as a subject that offers limited employability prospects for students, with this frame appearing 41 times (16.6%) across all stories. Janet Street-Porter's opinion column (*The*

*Daily Mail*, 11 November 2013) is an example of this, asserting that 'knowing all about Tony Hancock or the birth of breakfast telly doesn't guarantee you a job'. Exploring this further, she positions this landscape of students taking subjects such as Media Studies as one encouraged by the previous government in order to increase undergraduate student numbers: 'Labour's big push to attract more youngsters than ever to sign up for a University education has resulted in too many worthless degree courses, dreamt up by academic establishments anxious to fill their coffers'. This framing of the subject as unfruitful for future employment prospects often arises in tandem with the lens of it being an indicator that the previous Labour government had 'dumbed down' academic standards (*Daily Mail*, 26 December 2014) leaving the Conservatives to 'bring back proper exams and proper marking' (Hartley-Brewer, *Sunday Express*, 28 November 2010), and reverse the 'major dereliction of duty towards our nation's youngsters' (Phillips, *Daily Mirror*, 4 June 2014). All of these quoted instances assert that this rectification involves the removal of Media Studies.

A positive focus on employability skills offered by the subject only appeared in 11 stories (4.5%) across our 5-year sample. Media Studies resulting in achievement and success appeared in seven stories (2.8%), and the topic of subject funding only appeared twice (0.8%) overall. The links between media and industry also received little attention, with just six stories (2.4%) touching upon this theme. Such stories could of course have demonstrated the value of the subject in terms of employability, especially given the continued upward trajectory of the 'creative economy' (DCMS 2016). Martin Barker also found similar instances in his study of coverage between the years 1993 and 1999, with the same employability critique operating 'as a backdrop, a semi-separate resource to which critics can turn to provide tougher "ammunition" than soft complaints about "standards" can provide' (2001, 216). As Thornham and O'Sullivan observed in 2004, this had developed to become 'the most pressing of the attacks that media studies teachers in the UK face' (2004, 719). This trope remains visible in the 5-year coverage that we analysed, remaining an undercurrent in newspaper coverage at least 10 years later.

This theme perhaps more than any other reveals the distortions in the newspaper coverage about Media Studies. The latest HE Statistics Agency data (HESA 2015) on employment after graduation show it is patently untrue to assert Media Studies graduates are less likely to get a job after graduation from an undergraduate programme. The figures (for 2013–2014) show that 78.8% of UK-domiciled degree leavers in Mass Communications were in work (FT or PT) six months after graduation. This was more than Biological Sciences (61.9%), Physical Sciences (55.5%), Mathematical Sciences (56.2%), Computer Science (76.1%), Engineering and Technology (73%), Social Sciences (67.8%), Law (52.2%), Business Studies (75.3%), Languages (62.3%), History (58.8%) and Education (77.3%).<sup>8</sup> Acknowledging such statistics however would clearly work against a dominant narrative that has now also become a historic one.

### **Framing by newspaper**

As Table 2 below shows, unpacking the framing of news coverage by publication reveals interesting patterns across newspapers:

- (1) *The Guardian* presented a more positive view of Media Studies as a worthwhile subject (20 stories) than any other newspaper in our sample, and this accounted for 50% of all the stories that framed the subject as worthwhile to study. *The Independent* had the second highest, with eight stories using this frame.
- (2) The framing of Media Studies as a 'soft'/'Mickey Mouse' subject was led by *The Daily Telegraph*, followed by *The Daily Mail* and *The Times*. Within these papers across our five-year sample, *The Daily Telegraph* presented Media Studies as a worthwhile subject just four times (compared to 40 'soft' subject/'Mickey Mouse' stories), *The Daily Mail* three times (compared to 31 negative), and *The Times* twice (compared to 29 negative).
- (3) A similar pattern was found for reporting focused on lack of/negative employability prospects, with *The Daily Telegraph*, *The Times* and *The Mail* leading. Conversely, a more positive stance

Table 2. Frames across newspaper.

|  | Publication  |               |            |              |           |                     |              |       |            |         | Total |
|--|--------------|---------------|------------|--------------|-----------|---------------------|--------------|-------|------------|---------|-------|
|  | The guardian | Daily express | Daily mail | Daily mirror | The times | The daily telegraph | Independ-ent | The I | Daily star | The sun |       |
| Soft subject/Mickey Mouse                      | 16           | 10            | 31         | 1            | 29        | 40                  | 10           | 5     | 0          | 9       | 151   |
| HE discussion                                  | 13           | 5             | 16         | 1            | 21        | 26                  | 15           | 5     | 0          | 3       | 105   |
| Government action/policy                       | 11           | 6             | 16         | 1            | 10        | 24                  | 6            | 6     | 0          | 4       | 84    |
| A level discussion                             | 17           | 3             | 11         | 2            | 17        | 17                  | 7            | 4     | 1          | 0       | 79    |
| GCSE discussion                                | 8            | 2             | 13         | 1            | 8         | 13                  | 2            | 4     | 0          | 4       | 55    |
| Employability (negatively)                     | 1            | 2             | 9          | 1            | 9         | 10                  | 6            | 1     | 1          | 1       | 41    |
| Worthwhile/challenging subject                 | 20           | 1             | 3          | 0            | 2         | 4                   | 8            | 2     | 0          | 0       | 40    |
| Lower number of students taking media studies  | 2            | 1             | 4          | 0            | 3         | 6                   | 5            | 2     | 0          | 1       | 24    |
| Higher number of students taking media studies | 4            | 1             | 3          | 2            | 5         | 4                   | 1            | 0     | 0          | 0       | 20    |
| Tuition fees/student loans                     | 0            | 2             | 6          | 0            | 3         | 3                   | 2            | 0     | 0          | 1       | 17    |
| Media studies courses(s) being reformed        | 4            | 0             | 3          | 1            | 1         | 5                   | 1            | 1     | 0          | 0       | 16    |
| Desire to study                                | 4            | 1             | 2          | 0            | 1         | 1                   | 1            | 1     | 1          | 0       | 12    |
| Employability (positively)                     | 0            | 0             | 3          | 0            | 1         | 0                   | 6            | 1     | 0          | 0       | 11    |
| Media studies course(s) being launched         | 3            | 0             | 1          | 0            | 2         | 1                   | 0            | 2     | 0          | 0       | 9     |
| Pay  | 0            | 0             | 0          | 0            | 2         | 3                   | 2            | 1     | 1          | 0       | 9     |
| Achievement/success                            | 0            | 1             | 1          | 0            | 3         | 0                   | 2            | 0     | 0          | 0       | 7     |
| Industry links                                 | 3            | 0             | 0          | 0            | 1         | 0                   | 2            | 0     | 0          | 0       | 6     |
| Teaching hours decrease                        | 0            | 0             | 2          | 0            | 1         | 1                   | 0            | 0     | 0          | 1       | 5     |
| Teaching facilities                            | 3            | 0             | 0          | 0            | 0         | 0                   | 2            | 0     | 0          | 0       | 5     |
| Teaching standards                             | 0            | 0             | 1          | 0            | 0         | 2                   | 0            | 0     | 1          | 0       | 4     |
| Theory/vocational balance                      | 1            | 0             | 0          | 0            | 0         | 0                   | 2            | 0     | 0          | 0       | 3     |
| UCAS points system                             | 1            | 0             | 1          | 0            | 0         | 1                   | 0            | 0     | 0          | 0       | 3     |
| Subject funding                                | 0            | 0             | 1          | 0            | 0         | 1                   | 0            | 0     | 0          | 0       | 2     |
| Total  | 41           | 14            | 43         | 4            | 41        | 57                  | 22           | 12    | 3          | 10      | 247   |

of Media Studies leading to positive employment prospects was found in *The Independent*, which published 6 of the 11 stories featuring this frame.

Daniel Berkowitz argues that ‘thinking of news meanings [through frames] suggests that issues can be discussed in specific ways, with specific boundaries applied to which meanings are included in the discussion ... certain depictions become the dominant way of thinking as the issue runs its course’ (2009, 106). Overall, these findings demonstrate that there is a tendency for some right of centre press (*The Daily Telegraph*, *Daily Mail* and *The Times*) to present a ‘dominant way of thinking’ via a more restricted and singular view of the value of Media Studies, whereas some left of centre papers (*The Guardian* and *The Independent*) demonstrate consideration of a wider spectrum of frames. Of course, the discussion and coverage presented to readers of a newspaper does not necessarily mean that all readers agree or will adopt these viewpoints, and we do not wish to imply that here. However, what does have significance is how the themes, voices used and information included shape the architecture of debate. This is particularly evident when sources used within stories and their political affiliations are scrutinized, as we will now move on to explore.

### Sources and political viewpoints: a domination of political and conservative voices

In our analysis we also coded for sources that appeared within stories, in order to explore the breadth of contributors that were given a voice within the discussions surrounding Media Studies. A source was classed as an individual or body contributing a direct quote that appeared in quotation marks within a news story.

As the above table demonstrates, there was a dominance of political sources across our sample, accounting for 21.3% of all sources. In other words, the debate about Media Studies was informed and dictated by an elite top-down discourse, which could somewhat explain the predominance of a partial and singular representation of the subject in the newspaper coverage in our sample. Journalists/media professionals appeared as sources less than half as frequently as politicians. For opinion pieces, the journalist or article author was coded as the first source in order to capture the frequency of their views being expressed within the coverage and potential debate surrounding the subject, thus resulting in them receiving the second highest appearance across coverage. Teachers/lecturers, academic/experts and students/pupils all received a fair amount of inclusion as sources, yet each still remained under 10% of all sources. Parents were largely invisible in the coverage, only appearing 8 times across all stories, and members of the public also remained scarce, appearing 13 times overall. It is also important to note here that a counter-narrative is more than just the aggregated count of oppositional voices who might appear as sources (for example) seven and eight in an article about a topic. What the sample showed consistently is that visibility and voice were afforded to those who were damning in their appraisal of the subject Tables 3–5.

In order to unpack the overall spread of political representation in the coverage, we coded for political party allegiance of political sources, which could be identified 94 times. In terms of political perspectives, all the main UK political parties appeared at least once across the news coverage in our sample.

As the above table demonstrates, Conservative viewpoints overwhelmingly dominated the other political parties, appearing 85.1% of the time. This is perhaps somewhat unsurprising since the ruling Government during our sample was either the Conservative, or the Conservative/Lib Dem coalition. However, the large gap between the representation of views from Conservative and Labour – the preceding Government and other major UK party – is quite striking. Examining the spread of these sources across the newspapers reveals some interesting patterns. *The Daily Telegraph*, *Daily Mail* and *The Times* had the highest numbers of politically anchored sources in the stories they covered, and all three papers had the most frequent use of Conservative sources. No newspaper in our sample featured a Labour politician’s perspective on education more than once in all their coverage, with the political party appearing just four times across our sample period.

**Table 3.** Sources across news coverage.

| Source                      | Count | Percentage |
|-----------------------------|-------|------------|
| Politician/political        | 112   | 21.3       |
| Journalist/media            | 53    | 10.1       |
| Teacher/lecturer            | 52    | 9.9        |
| Academic/expert             | 50    | 9.5        |
| Student/pupil               | 46    | 8.7        |
| NGO                         | 39    | 7.4        |
| Regulator/quality assurance | 25    | 4.7        |
| Other                       | 24    | 4.6        |
| University                  | 19    | 3.6        |
| Business                    | 16    | 3.0        |
| Russell group               | 15    | 2.8        |
| Union                       | 15    | 2.8        |
| Citizen                     | 13    | 2.5        |
| Exam boards                 | 12    | 2.3        |
| Civil society               | 9     | 1.7        |
| Celebrity/public figure     | 9     | 1.7        |
| Parent                      | 8     | 1.5        |
| Think tank                  | 7     | 1.3        |
| UCAS                        | 3     | .6         |
| Total                       | 527   | 100.0      |

**Table 4.** Political affiliation of political sources.

| Political party | Count | Percent |
|-----------------|-------|---------|
| Conservative    | 80    | 85.1    |
| Lib dem         | 4     | 4.3     |
| Labour          | 4     | 4.3     |
| Sinn fein       | 2     | 2.1     |
| A.P.            | 2     | 2.1     |
| UKIP            | 1     | 1.1     |
| SNP             | 1     | 1.1     |
| Plaid cymru     | 0     | 0       |
| Total           | 94    | 100     |

**Table 5.** Political affiliation of political sources by publication.

|                                      | Conservative | UKIP | Lib dem | SNP | Labour | Sinn fein | A.P. | Total |
|--------------------------------------|--------------|------|---------|-----|--------|-----------|------|-------|
| The guardian/observer                | 5            | 0    | 0       | 0   | 1      | 0         | 0    | 6     |
| Daily express/sunday express         | 3            | 1    | 0       | 0   | 1      | 0         | 0    | 5     |
| Daily mail/mail on sunday            | 18           | 0    | 2       | 0   | 1      | 0         | 0    | 21    |
| Daily mirror/sunday mirror           | 0            | 0    | 0       | 0   | 0      | 2         | 2    | 4     |
| The times/sunday times               | 15           | 0    | 0       | 1   | 0      | 0         | 0    | 16    |
| The daily telegraph/sunday telegraph | 31           | 0    | 2       | 0   | 1      | 0         | 0    | 34    |
| Independent/independent on sunday    | 1            | 0    | 0       | 0   | 0      | 0         | 0    | 1     |
| The I                                | 2            | 0    | 0       | 0   | 0      | 0         | 0    | 2     |
| The sun                              | 5            | 0    | 0       | 0   | 0      | 0         | 0    | 5     |
| Total                                | 80           | 1    | 4       | 1   | 4      | 2         | 2    | 94    |

The landscape of reporting on Media Studies is thus highly dominated by Conservative voices and viewpoints, with a scarcity of oppositional or broader political representation across the spectrum. This is a striking finding from the analysis and no doubt has an impact on how the subject is represented and framed, especially in the educational supplements of these newspapers, which parents and prospective students or pupils may turn to for guidance alongside online rankings and guides.<sup>9</sup>



## Conclusion

This study has examined the construction and representation of Media Studies education in the British press. It has been demonstrated that the politically right of centre papers in particular have promoted an understanding of Media Studies as devoid of educational value and even a potential hindrance to employability, even in the face of evidence to the contrary. We have shown that debate about the subject has been informed by a top-down discourse of elite political and Conservative party sources, with a scarcity of oppositional or broader political representation. As such, there are attempts to delegitimize Media Studies and empty it of value that can be characterized as ideological as well as (now) historical.

These findings have broad repercussions. Firstly, when choosing subjects of study newspapers remain an important source of information for students and pupils. If they are being presented with only a partial – and predominantly negative – appraisal of the subject then they are clearly not in possession of all of the facts. This should be a major concern to all those interested in the recruitment of diverse high quality students onto programmes. Secondly, if Media Studies as an academic discipline is delegitimized then it becomes too easy to dismiss its critiques; critiques that often circulate around questions of power, influence, representation and value. This might be in the interests of politicians, even journalists, but it cannot be in the interests of an informed citizenry. It seems clear that there are elements inherent to the composition of Media Studies that the press and politicians take issue with. Speculating on what those might be is outside the scope of this article, but further research could be enlightening, benefitting perhaps from interviews with politicians and their press officers, journalists/media professionals, parents and students. Such dialogue would be fruitful as ‘the defence of media studies becomes stronger from taking a wider view of the field’ (Macdonald 2006, 136). Such a project might also investigate how Media Studies scholars themselves have negotiated this characterization of the discipline, and where they *have* found alternative outlets to refute it.

We began this article by asking if the representation of Media Studies within the British Press was as bleak as depicted by the scholars we spoke to in the HEA study, themselves constructed in the press as merely ‘Fleet Street sub-editors fallen on hard times’ (*Mail on Sunday*, 3 July 2011). This article has gone on to demonstrate that it is bleak indeed. This is amply captured by Ed Cumming who wrote in *The Daily Telegraph* (2011): ‘the only glittering is the sun bouncing off the tear-stained cheeks of people who thought Media Studies was a good choice of course’. This discipline, and those who speak out on its behalf, has a mountain to climb in order to reconfigure the debate within which Media Studies continues to be framed.

## Notes

1. The Summary HEA report including a full list can be accessed at <https://www.heacademy.ac.uk/sites/default/files/teaching-learning-in-the-disciplines-summary.pdf> (Accessed 4th February 2016).
2. Education is a devolved issue but nevertheless in our discussions what was happening in Westminster dominated.
3. Qualifications are taken at the ages of 16 and 18 in many parts of the UK. In Scotland students take ‘Higher’ examinations and some schools in Wales opt for the Welsh Baccalaureate. The wider debate also includes reference to the EBacc qualification.
4. Results for Unit 36 Communications, Cultural and Media Studies, Library and Information Management at <http://results.ref.ac.uk/Results/ByUoa/36>.
5. By which we mean the near collapse of Media Studies at GCSE and GCE level in the UK.
6. As at LSE <http://www.lse.ac.uk/study/undergraduate/howToApply/lseEntryRequirements.aspx>, UCL, <https://www.ucl.ac.uk/prospective-students/undergraduate/application/requirements/a-levels/preferred-a-levels>, Trinity College, Cambridge <http://www.trin.cam.ac.uk/admissions/ug/apply/a-level-combinations>.
7. MeCCSA’s leaflet ‘Studying Media, Film and Communication at University: choosing the right course for you’ (2012) responded to some of these claims.
8. These figures do not include statistics for those going on to further study which is common in Physical Sciences, Mathematical Sciences, History and Law. To take a brief comparison with Mathematical Sciences, the figures for FT/PT work and further study total 87.2%, and for Mass Communications and Documentation this total is 86.3% making them broadly comparable. These statistics of course do not tell us anything about average salary or employment activity.
9. Whether these tell a different story is outside the scope of this study.

## Acknowledgements

The authors would like to thank Professor Martin Barker and Professor Natalie Fenton for their extremely valuable comments and feedback on this study and its write-up, in addition to the peer reviewers.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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